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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000095

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, SEMEP, NEA/IR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2020
TAGS: [EFIN](#) [ETTTC](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [IR](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MFA PROVIDES DETAILS ON PLANE IT WANTS FOR
AL-ASAD; WILL SEEK TO CONFIRM ACTION ON BANK AMAN

REF: A) DAMASCUS 87 (NOTAL) B) 09 DAMASCUS 883 C) 09
STATE 124998

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Ever hopeful that a way can be found to obtain a "Syrian Air Force One" for President al-Asad, Foreign Minister Muallim's chief of staff, Bassam Sabbagh, took advantage of a January 31 meeting with CDA (reported septel) to provide details about the airplane the Emir of Qatar offered Asad last spring as a gift. The craft is an Airbus 340 manufactured in 2002 and bought by China Air in 2003. In 2007 it was sold to Taiwan-based Mandarin Air before the Qatari government purchased it the next year. Qatar then sent the plane to Texas, where it was modified into a VIP airliner (NFI). Now back in Qatar, the plane bears the registration A7-AAH. The SARG has been unable to take delivery of it because Airbus planes exceed the U.S. content threshold allowed under the Syria Accountability Act (SAA).

12. (C) The Syrians have made clear to each of the last three delegations to meet with President Asad and FM Muallim (Codel Gregg, Codel Hastings and SEMEP Mitchell) the intensity of their desire to have a "Syrian Air Force One." The latest twist came when the MFA posited during Sen. Mitchell's visit (ref A) that a waiver ought to be possible because the plane in question is used, not new. Sen. Mitchell, Special Coordinator Hof and post have all stressed that the age of the plane is unlikely to make a difference given that no basis in law now exists for a waiver for whole aircraft.

13. (C) Sabbagh asked for guidance on how to interpret SEMEP's Mitchell's observation to FM Muallim ten days earlier that "the law would have to be changed" for Syria to be able to import a plane. CDA clarified that this was a statement of fact, not an offer to change the law (which would require an Executive Order and congressional notification). As the reason exceptions to the SAA could be granted remained unclear to him, Sabbagh sought further explanation about what the sanctions cover and why a waiver could be granted for spare parts but not for a plane. CDA walked him through the basic premise of the SAA: no product with more than ten percent U.S. content can be exported to Syria except food, medicine and those items covered by waiver provisions. This elucidation seemed to impress on him the difficulty of obtaining their goal of a long-haul presidential aircraft. (Comment: Even if the Syrians drop the "used vs. new" gambit, they are unlikely to give up pressing to get this plane. End comment.)

14. (C) After concluding the aviation discussion, CDA broached the subject of Bank Aman. President Asad had assured SEMEP Mitchell in private on January 20, some four weeks after post's initial demarche (refs B and C), that the joint venture between the Commercial Bank of Syria and Iran's Bank Saderat would not go forward, saying that though he was keeping the matter quiet there would be action "in a few days." CDA asked for confirmation that Bank Aman's license had been revoked. Sabbagh did not have information to share but asked his notetaker to look into the matter and pledged to follow up with the embassy this week.

HUNTER